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ABSTRACT

Oral responses of 180 male and female undergraduates to scenarios containing positive-loving, neutral-informational, and/or negative-rejecting (male) child communications were obtained and scored along 25 specific categories, as well as a global rating of acceptance/rejection of child. A factor analysis generated six factors, which, along with the global rating, were examined in terms of possible differences as a function of varying child communications. Results supported the hypothesis that adults would respond with communications whose affect matched that of the child's. Further, males were found to be more rejecting and punitive than females, and subjects, in general, appeared unable to respond in an empathic, child-centered manner to any type of child communication. (Author)

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Adult Responses to Child Communications[1]

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Adult Responses to Child Communication

The purpose of this study was to examine systematically adult responses to emotion-laden communications of a male child. Although there has been much speculation about, and some research on, the components of adult-child interactions that are hypothesized to maximize the prosocial development of the young child (e.g. Baumrind, 1975; Ginott, 1966), there have been little quantitative data generated that describe the specific responses of adults to 5-8 year-old children in both intimate and antagonistic encounters. The present study examined the extent to which the verbal responses of adults to an expressive school-aged child were "sensitive" and "effective" as defined by Stollak, Scholem, Kallman, and Saturansky (1973) or "insensitive" and "destructive" as defined by Gordon (1970)

In addition to identifying specific responses of adults to emotion-laden child communications, another goal of the present research was to investigate the role of reciprocity in adult-child communication. Leary (1957), for example, posits a principle of reciprocal relations which holds that "interpersonal reflexes tend with a probability greater than chance to initiate or invite reciprocal interpersonal responses from the other person in interaction that leads to a repetition of the original reflex" (p. 125). Thus, it was hypothesized that loving, neutral, and angry child communications would elicit reciprocal adult responses.

Further, research (e.g. Rothbart & Maccoby, 1966) has demonstrated that males and females respond somewhat differently to children. Thus, it seemed reasonable also to examine whether the sex of the adult was related to his/her responses to the male child's communications in the present study.

Almost all investigations involving observation of adult and young school-aged child interaction in the playroom or at home are limited by the relative infrequency of need-arousing and conflictual situations, as well as intimate and loving moments. For many reasons, the interactions observed in these investigations often do not reflect validly the daily experiences encountered by children of these ages. In an attempt to overcome this limitation, the present study had subjects role play a parent and verbalize their responses to sequences of tape recorded child communications that systematically varied in the direction and intensity of their emotional content. Rausch, Barry, Hertel, & Swain (1974) have discussed this type of methodology as a means of obtaining information descriptive of important communication patterns.

Method

Subjects and Design

Subjects in the study were 180 (90 male and 90 female) undergraduates who were enrolled in introductory psychology classes and who received extra credit for participating. There were five subjects in each of the 36 experimental conditions of a 2 (Sex) X 2 (Situation order) X 3 (Affect of Child's First Communication) X 3 (Affect of Child's Second Communication) X 2 (Situation, a repeated measure) X 2 (Adult Response, a repeated measure) design.

Instrument

The parent-child interaction projective tape (PCIPT) presents subjects with four tape-recorded communications from a male child. The PCIPT consists of two similar situational contexts; in each the child's voice (in an appropriate tone) emits two communications. Each communication could be loving, or neutral, or angry. In Situation 1, for example, a tape-recorded

voice instructs the subject to "imagine you have just returned home from shopping and, as you are putting the last groceries away, your seven-year-old son comes in and says [i.e., a child's voice emits]...." either a loving message, a neutral message, or an angry message. The child also emits a second message after the adult responds to his first communication (see below). Situation 2 involves similar child communications but portrayed a setting in which the child upon returning from school, approaches his parent, who is upstairs typing. The subject responds to one of the nine possible two-part interaction sequences, the same for both Situation 1 and 2, which represent all permutations of the three types of child communication (loving, neutral, or angry) taken two at a time. Situations 1 and 2 were given in alternate order across subjects.

Procedure

A female experimenter asked each subject to pretend that s/he actually was the parent of a 7-year-old boy. The subject was told to respond verbally to the tape-recorded child communication as if s/he actually were in that situation and having that dialogue with him. The subject was told further, that based on his/her first response, that the experimenter then would select an appropriate second child communication to which the subject also was to respond as if in a continuing dialogue. Each subject was given two unrelated practice dialogues in order to become familiar with the role playing task. Following this rehearsal, the subject was given the PCIPT.

Results

Scoring the Dependent Variables

The adult responses were scored into the 25 categories listed in Table 1. Each subject responsed to four child communications (two communications per situation). Each response could be scored for more than

one category, but a category could only be scored once in each response. Reliability estimates were obtained for each category via six raters who independently rated responses from one third of the subjects; correlation coefficients (rs) for the three rater pairs ranged from .63 to 1.0, with a mean reliability of .91 for the 25 categories.

In addition to the specific scoring categories, each of the subjects' four responses also was rated on a 10-point scale of global acceptance/rejection. The three rater pairs also independently rated one-third of the subjects' responses for the acceptance/rejection measure, and obtained a mean interrater reliability (r) of .87.

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 1 presents the category name, mean category usage, standard deviation and factor loadings for the 25 scoring categories. Adult responses were scored and the mean frequency of category usage was factor analyzed (principal component, Varimax rotation). The factor loadings generated by the analysis indicate that the categories could be represented by six reasonably independent factors that accounted for .50 of the cumulative, proportionate variance. Loadings for five of the categories were so low or diffuse across the Factors that it seemed ~~non~~warrented to exclude them from further examination. Based upon the factor analysis, six composite variables were generated via summing across the appropriate adult responses. The resultant composite scores described the following modes of responding: I) directing-control; II) power assertion; III) adult expression of child's influence upon them; IV) empathy; V) ridicule-interrogation; and VI) instrumental control. These composite scores, along with a global Acceptance/Rejection Scale, served as dependent variables that were examined in relation to the independent variables.

Multivariate Analysis of Variance

The seven dependent variables were subjected to a 2 (Sex) X 2 (Situation Order) X 3 (Affect of First Child Communication) X 3 (Affect of Second Child Communication) X 2 (Situation) X (Adult Response) multivariate analysis of variance, with the last two factors repeated within subjects. When a multivariate *F* ratio exceeded a confidence level of .05, associated univariate *F* ratios for each of the seven factors were examined. Findings are reported below for univariate results which were significant at $p < .01$. Appropriate simple effects analyses further investigated any significant interactions, and individual comparisons (Winer, 1971, p. 384) between the loving and neutral and between neutral and angry child communications also were performed where appropriate. The multivariate analysis revealed a large number of significant effects (17 out of 31). A detailed presentation of all the univariate findings is beyond the scope of this report; however, the analyses did yield a consistent pattern of results for the variables of most interest--affect of child's communication and sex--so only the findings for these variables are summarized below.

Effects of affect of child's communication. Table 2 presents relevant means and *F*-ratios for those measures that were significantly affected by the type of communication that the child emitted. The statistical analyses revealed that the type of affect expressed by the child had a significant effect on five of the seven measures. As Table 2 indicates, individual comparisons revealed significant differences in the adults' responses to loving versus neutral child communications, as reflected by the overall rating of acceptance-rejection, $F(1,144) = 58.86$, and the score for adults' statements of how they felt (i.e., the composite score based upon Factor III), $F = 301.04$. These findings indicate that subjects were more

accepting and revealing when the child's communication was loving than when it was neutral. Similarly, individual comparisons revealed that subjects were more accepting in general and less directing-controlling (i.e., the composite score based on Factor I) when they were confronted with a neutral child communication than when they heard an angry communication, $F = 73.66, 87.84$, respectively. Moreover, male subjects were found to resort to responses that reflected power assertion (i.e., the composite score based on Factor II) and ridicule-interrogation (i.e., the composite score based on Factor V) less when the child's communication was neutral than when it

Insert Table 2 about here

was negative. Thus, subjects, especially males, tended to be less destructive in response to neutral than to angry communications.

Sex. Table 3 presents the relevant means and F-ratios for measures that revealed significant differences as a function of sex of subject. Overall, females were rated as more accepting than were males; moreover, they displayed significantly less power assertion and ridicule-interrogation in response to negative child communications than did males.

Insert Table 3 about here

Discussion

We expected that adults would have a strong propensity to respond to child messages with reciprocal or matched behavior. We found support for this hypothesis in general, but it was confirmed most clearly by data from the molar ratings of acceptance-rejection. Adult communications that were globally rated as reflecting the greatest degree of acceptance of the male

child came in response to loving child messages, while angry messages from the child elicited reciprocal angry-rejecting responses from adults.

Sex differences in modes of adult response, which confirmed previous findings, were also obtained in this study (see, for example, Becker's (1964) review of studies of parental discipline). These studies (especially Rothbart & Maccoby, 1966) indicate that fathers of boys are stricter, more punishing, and more fear-arousing than mothers, who tend to be more nurturant in their discipline of their sons. Thus, the sex differences that were found in the present research lend support to the role stereotype of more punitive, harsher males, and more nurturant, less directly attacking females. Given Rothbart and Maccoby's (1966) findings, however, this pattern of results may be less generalizable to interactions with female children.

Findings indicated that subjects, especially males, tended to respond to angry child communications with "destructive" responses rather than with attempts to understand why the child was angry. Other categories of responses thought to have a positive influence on mental health could have been used in answer to the child's angry--or for that matter, loving or neutral--communications, but these were relatively infrequent. Thus, the categories that loaded substantially on Factor IV represent a very important interpersonal construct: empathy. These categories focus on the child's feelings and they reflect an ability of the adult to be <u>aware</u> of the psychological state of the child and <u>express</u> that recognition or understanding to the child. This awareness of the <u>other</u> in interaction has been theorized to be a critical element of healthy relationships and has received strong empirical support in psychotherapy research (Truax & Mitchell, 1971). However, these four categories, individually, were among the least frequently used modes of responding; (see Table 1) and differences in the

Factor IV composite score were not found across the three types of child communication. Adults did express their own experience (Factor III usage)--although only when in response to a loving child messages--but, in this study, they could not "de-center" and empathically take the point of view of the child in response to any type of child communication.

A methodological limitation of this study was that data were not obtained from actual face-to-face parent-child encounters. The role playing methodology used was found to be an effective means of obtaining seemingly natural responses since subjects had to respond immediately to an affective child cue with their own verbalized responses. Moreover, Kallman and Stollak (note 1)--who used the same scoring system as that employed in the present study--found that mothers of elementary school-aged children responded to hypothetical need arousing situations with a child in a manner that was very similar to the way that undergraduates responded both in their study and in the present research.

It is clear, however, future research should involve the study of parents and young school-aged children directly. To overcome the possible problem of infrequency of intimate and conflictual situations during naturalistic observation, role-playing and conflict-resolution tasks between family members may yield important information about the consistency and reciprocal nature of parent and family communication patterns. If such future research shows a strong, consistent reciprocity, especially in response to angry-conflictual child communications from males, and empathic behaviors are not found to be high or prepotent responses in parents' and other adults' repertoires then a significant direction for intervention would be to break into the chain and help adults of both sexes "de-center" and learn to be more empathic to all child communications.

Reference Note

1. Kallman, J. R. & Stollak, G. E. Maternal behavior toward children in need arousing situations. Paper presented at the 1974 meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association in Chicago.

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Footnotes

[1]Persons who are interested in obtaining a more detailed report of the results should write to the first author.

Table 1

Mean Category Usage, Standard Deviations, and Factor Loadings for Scoring Categories Comprising the 6 Factors

			Mean Usage	Std. Dev.	Factor
Factor I	Lecturing-Directing				
Category	4	Advising, providing solutions	.55	.88	.67
	5	Lecturing, arguing	.66	1.11	.72
	22	Attempt to obtain more info. regarding C. behavior	.77	1.31	-.35
Factor II	Power Assertion-Control				
Category	1	Ordering, directing, commanding	.66	1.27	.59
	2	Warning, admonishing, threatening	.09	.55	.63
	3	Exhorting, moralizing, preaching	.96	1.48	.43
	9	Interpreting, diagnosing, analyzing	.10	.47	.37
	12	Withdrawing, distracting, avoiding	.06	.34	.60

Table I (Cont.)

Mean Category Usage, Standard Deviations, and Factor Loadings for Scoring Categories Comprising the 6 Factors

		Mean Usage	Std. Dev.	Factor Loading
Factor III	Adult Expression of Child's Influence Upon Them			
Category 14	Statement of A. feelings	1.76	1.92	.35
15	Relating C. feelings to A. feelings	.20	.69	.56
17	Relating C. behavior to A. feelings	.77	.88	.56
Factor IV	Empathy			
Category 13	Statement of C. feelings	.13	.49	.67
16	Relates C. feelings to A. behavior	.05	.28	.53
20	C. given directions regarding expression of feelings	.02	.18	.45
23	C. offered compromise or alternative	.47	.90	.39

Table I (Cont.)

Mean Category Usage, Standard Deviations, and Factor Loadings for Scoring Categories Comprising the 6 Factors

			Mean Usage	Std. Dev.	Factor Loading
Factor V	Ridicule-Interrogation				
Category	8	Name-calling, ridiculing, shaming	.18	.71	.60
	11	Cross-examining, interrogating	.75	1.35	.70
Factor VI	Instrumental Control				
Category	18	Relating C. behavior to A. behavior	.02	.14	.60
	21	Attempt to obtain more info. regarding C. feelings	.46	.97	-.33
	24	A. control exerted through bribe or contingent demand	.12	.55	.74
Categories Not Loading Substantially on a Factor					
Category	6	Judging negatively, disapproving	.10	.45	.24
	7	Praising, approving, agreeing	.72	1.26	.24

Table I (Cont.)

Mean Category Usage, Standard Deviations, and Factor Loadings for Scoring Categories Comprising the 6 Factors

		Mean Usage	Std. Dev.	Factor Loading
Categories Not Loading Substantially on a Factor (cont.)				
10	Supporting, reassuring, agreeing	.10	.61	.20
19	C. Given directions	.83	1.31	.20
25	A. compliance, appeasement	.26	.70	.22

Note: "C" = Child, "A" = Adult

Table II

Means and F-Ratios of Measures of Adults' Responses

to Three types of Child Communications

	Affect of Child Communication			
Measures	Loving	Neutral	Angry	F
Directing-Controlling	1.46[a]	1.13[a]	3.47[b]	72.56
Power-Assertion	.11[a]	.40[a]	2.88[b]	66.00
Adult Expression of Childs' Influence Upon Them	3.75[a]	.21[b]	.55[b]	183.82
Ridicule-Interrogation for Males	.03[a]	.33[a]	1.56[b]	20.37
Overall Acceptance/Rejection	8.41[a]	6.89[b]	5.18[c]	132.38

Note: Significant individual comparisons between loving and neutral or between neutral and angry child communications are identified by different superscripts.

Means and F-Ratios of Adults' Responses

Reflecting Significant Sex Differences

	Sex of Adult		
Measure	Male	Female	F
Overall Acceptance-Redjection	6.51	7.0	11.10
Power Assertion to Angry Child Communications	2.33	1.13	28.62
Ricicule-Interrogation to Angry Child Communications	1.56	.46	23.46